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ABSTRACT

Basic to good programming is input from and support of the individuals for whom the program is developed. This essential philosophy is termed "participatory management" in business environments and provides a framework in a university setting for establishing a program involving considerable money, staff commitment and effort, institutional backing, and business and industry support. Such student involvment and support is being fostered in the Cooperative Education program in the University of Georgia's Cooperative Education program. Cooperative education is a structured educational plan alternating periods of work with periods of academic study to help students identify career goals, relate them to their academic achievements, and develop skills systematically in both areas. The cooperative Education staff has worked to support and encourage a student initiated and maintained network called The Co-op Club. The Co-op Club's input in program planning and development is providing necessary administrative, creative, and evaluative input to broaden and strengthen the Cooperative Education program campus and community wide, all of which indicates that the effort involved to initiate and support this type of organization is worthwhile. (Author/ABL)

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"The Co-op Club: Utilization of Students in Program Development"

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Summary:

Basic to good programming is input from and support of the individuals for whom the program is developed. This essential philosophy is termed "participatory management" in business environments and provides a framework in a University setting for establishing a program involving considerable money, staff commitment and effort, institutional backing, and business and industry support.

Such student involvement and support is being fostered in the Cooperative Education program at The University of Georgia through the creation of a student group called The Co-op Club. The Co-op Club's input in program planning and development is providing necessary administrative, creative, and evaluative input to broaden and strengthen the Cooperative Education program campus and community wide.

1. Student Participation in Program Planning

If programs for students are to survive and succeed they must have student input and support. This input not only maximizes students' experience of a program, but enhances the educational impact and development of such a program. Heath (1980) maintains that personal development of college students can be enhanced through programs that 1) expect and encourage students to take responsibility for growth in others and 2) provide opportunities for students to assume alternative roles. Experience has taught that programs can benefit equally from this kind of commitment and involvement.

According to Bond and McDonald (1980)"... educational development takes place as a result of the collaboration of peers, each taking equal responsibility and each having the same stake in the outcomes." This collaboration is a commitment of time, effort and energy and is necessary to programming at any level if that program is to grow from an idea into a reality. Continued commitment at that level is also necessary and "can only be initiated when both parties find the task congenial and are willing to invest a considerable effort together." (Bond and McDonald, 1981)

The goal of such input is "to provide alternate and creative perspectives and solutions, to assist with the processes of change, and to help the program get a better sense of its past, present, and future." (Pilon, Berquist, Quehl and Brodsky, 1979) Student input can provide accurate information on how the program really works, where problems actually are experienced, and what actions could be taken to make the program more effective and efficient. Continued input can reinforce the program's continuity by accentuating the changes that have been wrought as a result of collaborative effort. The expectation of such commitment and input is that it will be regarded and utilized in further programming efforts. It is a process of interaction, of responsiveness, and of development and participants "need to consider the implications of their work not just for the immediate [program] but also for the rest of the community in which [it functions]." (Bond and McDonald, 1980)

An element of risk is involved in the process, for "information which has been obtained may challenge...cherished assumptions and practices..." (Bond and McDonald, 1980). It may require reorganization or redirection of program goals and resources. Suggestions may also go unheeded, risking the participant's confidence in the input and sense of worth to the program. Continued disregard could threaten student participation in any aspect of the program, and ultimately threaten the program itself.

Therefore, student input in program development and maintenance can have significant impact not only on the students themselves, but

also on the quality, relevance, and continuity of the program in which the student participates.

2. Cooperative Education

One type of program on The University of Georgia campus and requiring such student input is Cooperative Education. Cooperative Education, a structured educational plan alternating periods of work with periods of academic study, helps students identify career goals, relate them to their academic achievements, and develop skills systematically in both areas.

To participate in co-op programs at The University of Georgia students must have accumulated 45 quarter hours towards graduation, have determined a major course of study, have and maintain a minimum grade point average of 2.5 on a 4.0 scale, and make a commitment to participate in the co-op program for a least three quarters. The majority of work assignments through The University of Georgia's Cooperative Education program are located in either Atlanta, Georgia or Washington, D.C. Relocation twice a year to these areas can pose a substantial challenge. Participation in co-op for several quarters can also delay a student's graduation for up to a year. Co-op, then, is a program involving some sacrifice on the part of student participants and is not a program entered into lightly.

Currently, The University of Georgia's Co-op program involves over 300 students, 150 employers, faculty and other academic staff in twelve of the thirteen colleges making up the University, a program director, professional staff of five, and clerical staff of three. In addition, both the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Vice President for Academic Affairs are very important links through which communication, support, and resources for the program are gained. Clearly, success of the Cooperative Education program is an important issue, and one with far reaching effects. Responsibility for a large part of that success rests with the 300 students who currently participate, and the thousands of students accessed through those 300 co-op students.

3. The Co-op Club

In order for a co-op program to succeed it must be of interest to students, meet identifiable student needs, and be supported by students. This support does not simply happen. It must be created, fostered, encouraged and rewarded. Students must perceive their support of the Cooperative Education program as valuable to the co-op program, their input as worthwhile, and their investment in these efforts as time well spent. If this is perceived and this support fostered, students can play an extremely important part in the recruitment of other student to the co-op program, in the establishment of a strong cross- disciplinary communication network,

in the development of additional job opportunities, and in program evaluation. In addition, individual student's talents can be utilized in developing marketing plans, in the implementation of office automation, and in a myriad of ways as diverse as the students themselves.

The Cooperative Education staff at the University of Georgia has worked to support and encourage a student initiated and maintained network called The Co-op Club in order to increase co-op students' involvement in the program from administrative, creative, and social perspectives. Membership in the club is open to all current co-op students, as well as students interested in gaining more information on and insight into the co-op program. Leadership is by student election, with one set of leaders elected to serve for a year during the Fall-Spring rotation, and the complementary set elected to serve during the Summer-Winter rotation. The Club meets monthly and has been registered through Student Activities (a division of Student Affairs) as an official University of Georgia organization.

Co-op Club students have established a Speakers Bureau of co-op students and employers who are available as speakers to campus and civic organizations. Students serve as contributing writers to the Co-op Communique, the co-op newsletter. Co-op Club members are also serving as communication channels into a multitude of service, professional, and social organizations, as well as into classrooms. Feedback on job development leads helps to create a stronger, broader co-op program as the staff works to develop job opportunities for the increasingly diverse group of students who have expressed interest in the program.

Evaluative feedback on the program is available from Co-op Club members and leaders who also serve on the Co-op student/Employer Advisory Board. With considerable student input the staff is addressing such issues and concerns as a statewide housing network making temporary housing more accessible, status as full-time students in good standing with The University of Georgia while away on co-op assignments, and the development of official positions on such pressing issues as drug testing and AIDS.

In return students gain access and exposure to high ranking officials within the University and business communities. Students have the opportunity to develop mentor relationships which can "enhance learning the ropes and prepare for advancement in an organization" as well as develop " a sense of competence, clarity of identify, and effectiveness in a professional role." (Kram, 1985)

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Given that students and programs benefit from student participation in planning, the effort involved to initiate and support an organization like the Co-op Club is very worthwhile.

Through participation in such an organization students gain exposure to the inner workings of an institution, experience the opportunity to be viewed as experts whose opinion is of value, and to practice administrative and managerial styles that will continue to develop throughout their career. Students gain access to officials in business and within the University and in such access begin to establish credibility and career networks.

In addition, programs like Cooperative Education gain student support in many forms: in the form of numbers of participants, in the communication networks available into a diverse array of classrooms as well as numerous service, professional and social organizations, in the form of relevant, accurate information on both the pluses and minuses of the program, and finally in viable, real life suggestions for improving and streamlining the program. Long range support of co-op is also fostered as co-op students graduate, enter the full-time work world, and possibly become employers themselves.

At The University of Georgia the phrase, Cooperative Education - You Earn a Future When You Earn a Degree, has expanded to include the Co-op program itself. The Co-op Program is earning its future through the Co-op Club while co-op students earn their degrees. Through students' support, energy, creativity and commitment, the future for Co-op at the University of Georgia looks very bright.

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